DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 423 EF 005 866

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TITLE	Multipurpose Spaces.
INSTITUTION	National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-06-00
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Center for Educational Facilities, 1090 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20005. Tel: 202-289-7800; Tel: 888-552-0624 (Toll Free); e-mail: ncef@nibs.org. For full text: http://www.edfacilities.org/ir/irpubs.html.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Design; *Design Requirements; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Lighting; *Multipurpose Classrooms; Public Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emerging trend of multipurpose class spaces, including educational trends influencing multipurpose classroom use, and key issues when using these spaces. Issues discussed include room location, technology integration, food services, acoustics, lighting, outdoor space, capacity, and storage. Design principles emphasized indicate multipurpose classrooms should reflect the spirit of the school and allow for flexibility and adaptability. (GR)

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Multipurpose Spaces

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June 2000

Budgetary constraints and the emphasis on flexibility have made the use of multipurpose spaces a feasible option for schools wishing to make the most out of limited space. Multipurpose spaces typically serve as a combination cafeteria and auditorium and often as gymnasium or play area as well.

Educational Trends

Multipurpose spaces became popular in the 1950s to accommodate the population surge from the baby boom (Wadsworth 1975: 60–63) and are a prevalent feature of today's schools. A recent study, for example, found that over half of Virginia's schools had a "cafetorium," a combination cafeteria and auditorium (Gillespie *et al* 1999: 9).

One reason for today's interest in multipurpose spaces is the increase in student enrollment coupled with a lack of fiscal resources. School systems faced with an overflowing capacity and strapped for funds have seen the multipurpose space as an effective way to meet their needs for space.

Interest in multipurpose spaces also has been prompted by the recent move in education towards smaller and more personalized learning environments. Small schools are thought to foster a sense of community, enhance student-teacher interaction, and promote academic engagement (Raywid 1998: 38). Because smaller schools often cannot afford to build single purpose spaces such as auditoriums, educational designers have focused on making such spaces serve several functions (SEDL 1998).

Key Issues for Multipurpose Spaces

The multipurpose space may need to accommodate a wide variety of activities, such as dining, plays, films, assemblies, community meetings, physical education, and large group instruction. Critics contend that such a "jack of all trades" mentality forces the multipurpose space into a position of not serving any one need well. Although it cannot perform specific functions as suitably as spaces designed for specialized uses, a well conceived multipurpose space nevertheless can be an adequate all-around facility.

Location. The multipurpose space should be located next to other public spaces and be acoustically separated from instructional areas. During after-school hours, it can be used for school and community events and, provided it has access to rest room facilities, remain open while the rest of the school is closed.

Integrating technology. The multipurpose space should be able to handle several forms of technology, just like any large lecture hall or classroom. Video, data, and electrical outlets should be spaced along the perimeter of the space, as well as at the edge of the stage. A sound system, video projection system, and cable and satellite capability also should be available.

Food services. When used as a cafeteria, the multipurpose space's wall and floor surfaces, furniture, and equipment should be easy to keep clean. Consideration should be given to the traffic flow if there will be several food service lines and places for returning trays and silverware.

Acoustics. The sound system should accommodate voice, film, and dramatic productions and be capable of handling microphones and the public address system. Walls and ceilings should incorporate proper acoustical treatment. A multi-tiered ceiling can enhance acoustics.

Lighting. More than one lighting system may be required in the multipurpose space. In addition to serving meetings and dining events, the lighting system should be able to handle stage performances, films, and multimedia presentations. This includes spotlights, light controls, and a dimmer system. Windows and skylights should have shades so the space can be darkened fully.

Outdoor space. An adjacent outdoor area for use as dining as well as lectures and performances can enhance

EF 005 866

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the multipurpose space, especially if it includes amenities such as a covered eating area or amphitheater.

Capacity. If the multipurpose space will be used as both a theater and a cafeteria, allow 10–14 square feet per person for dining and 7.5 square feet per person for performance seating. Plan for adequate chair and table storage.

Use of a stage. The stage should be as similar as possible to one in a traditional auditorium and allow easy movement of materials and large equipment (such as a grand piano). It should have access to a loading dock and any related spaces such as a gymnasium or outdoor area. It also should have storage and a "fly space," where curtains and scenery can be hung and stored. Raised stages must be accessible, via a ramp or other means, in accordance with federal accessibility requirements.

Design Principles for Multipurpose Spaces

All too often, the multipurpose space can have the feel of a vast and sterile room. Designers should therefore consider:

- **The multipurpose space as school symbol.** Schools lacking a dedicated auditorium must rely on the multipurpose space for holding large group functions. Parents, community members, and local officials may often see the multipurpose space before, or instead of, the rest of the school. The aesthetic and symbolic nature of the space should therefore convey the spirit and emphasis of the school (Duke 1998: 27–28). The space may be thought of as a Great Room, in the sense of a gathering place (Brubaker 1998: 136), with distinctive architectural features, colorful designs, and comfortable furniture.
- **Flexibility and adaptability.** The multipurpose space should be able to handle a wide range of functions. As noted, it should be designed with several lighting systems, have acoustically treated walls and ceilings, and be technologically integrated and easily maintained. A good multipurpose space should be able to satisfy the needs of its assigned functions—whether they be multimedia presentations, stage and musical productions, physical education, or dining services—at reasonably high levels of performance.

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Additional Information

See the NCEF annotated bibliography *Multipurpose Spaces*, online at *http://www.edfacilities.org/ir/hottopics.cfm.*

Reviewers

Eric Davis, Blane Dessy, Matthew Gregory, Ed Kirkbride, Judy Marks, Lorenz Schoff, and Gordon Stewart.

Sponsorship

This publication was funded in part by the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF), an affiliate clearinghouse of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) of the U.S. Department of Education.

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